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SUBJECT: ABKHAZIA: DFM KARASIN SPELLS OUT TOUGH RUSSIAN
LINE

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: At his initiative, DFM Karasin on August 28 briefed Western Friends Chiefs of Mission on developments in Abkhazia, which he had recently visited. He said Georgia's July operation in the Kodori Gorge was a violation of the 1994 ceasefire agreement and had created a "disbalance" in the region. He demanded the withdrawal of all Georgian armed formations from the Gorge. He called Georgia's deployment to the Gorge of the Government of Abkhazia in Exile a "provocation" and warned of Abkhazia's "ultimatum-like" response. He called Georgia's refusal to allow the CIS PKF to monitor the Gorge a violation of the ceasefire. He noted the upcoming renewal of UNOMIG's mandate, and said Georgia's action calls it into question; Russia would favor a statement on Kodori in any UNSCR (Ambassador later told Karasin privately that this would be a very complex issue and urged him to think carefully before setting off down this road). Karasin called on the Western Friends to recognize that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were "alarmed" at what they perceive as a Georgian commitment to resolve the conflicts by force. He called on Western Friends countries not to aid the "militarization" of Georgia. Karasin saw no need for a Civil Police contingent in Gali. End summary.

¶2. (C) Karasin, with special negotiator Bocharnikov and IV CIS Department acting Director Tarabrin, received chiefs of mission from the Western Friends -- U.S., UK, Germany and France -- on August 28. He expressed Russia's concern over the situation in the Kodori Gorge, which is "tending to degrade." He singled out Georgian President Saakashvili's August 15 instruction to create the infrastructure to relocate the "Abkhaz Government in Exile" in the Gorge. He noted that the Abkhaz have said that would be unacceptable, and have responded with tough, "ultimatum-like" responses declaring their unwillingness to resume peace negotiations unless the situation reverted to that before the Georgian operation. "We cannot ignore their attitude," Karasin said.

¶3. (C) Karasin stated that the May 1994 ceasefire agreement demanded the withdrawal of all Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge. He stressed that this applied to all Georgian armed formations (i.e., Interior Ministry forces as well as MOD). Karasin noted that the UNOMIG Chief Military Observer also believed the Georgian action to be a violation of the ceasefire. He added that subsequent agreements forbid the construction of military infrastructure there (the implication being that some of the construction ordered for relocating the Government in Exile might be a violation). Karasin asserted that contrary to notification agreements, the Georgian side never informed the Abkhaz side of its intention to carry out the operation.

¶4. (C) Karasin said that his trip to Sukhumi had convinced him that the Georgian operation had effected a "substantive disbalance" in the regional situation. The Georgian demand

that the CIS PKF not participate in monitoring the Upper Kodori Gorge was a clear violation of Article 4.2 of the 1994 ceasefire, he asserted. The Georgian excuse that the PKF presence was unacceptable to the local population "does not withstand critical scrutiny." Rather, new SRSR Arneaud had stressed the importance of the PKF during his recent visit to Tbilisi.

15. (C) Karasin reminded the Friends that the UNOMIG mandate needed renewal by October 15. He questioned whether any renewal would be worthwhile if Georgian forces do not leave Kodori. Bocharnikov added that the absence of comment on Kodori in previous UNSCRs had led to the current situation, and implied that Russia will demand a statement on Kodori in the October resolution. (After the meeting, Ambassador privately told Karasin that Russian concerns could seriously complicate the process of adopting a UNSCR.)

16. (C) Karasin said that Tbilisi's action to renege on previous agreements was also noticeable in South Ossetia. Karasin counted "on your wisdom to tell Georgia that it cannot resolve these conflicts by force. Rather, it will destroy what has been accomplished. If we unite our forces, however, we can facilitate progress in negotiations." Karasin called on the Friends to understand the Abkhaz position on non-renewal of hostilities and security guarantees. He cited the Georgian-Abkhaz Coordination Council as a hopeful venue, though the "changed circumstances" might make sessions problematic. At the same time, the Sochi working groups on IDPs and the railroad had not exhausted their potential.

17. (C) Karasin said that the opening of a human rights office in Gali was a positive impulse, but he said he was not convinced that deployment of a Civil Police contingent would

MOSCOW 00009414 002 OF 002

aid negotiations. The criminal situation, which has improved in the past year, does not warrant physical reinforcement of police structures. Ambassador suggested that the Civil Police idea deserved further study and might help ease tensions over time.

18. (C) Karasin said that after normalization of the situation in the zone of conflict progress might be made on peace initiatives, including Bagapsh's "Key to the Future and an analogous paper elaborated in Tbilisi (Comment: He made no mention of the Boden Paper. End comment). In reply to a question by the Ambassador, Karasin stressed that the next step needed to be fostering a greater understanding by both the Abkhaz and the Georgians of the factors that alarmed each of them. He feared that the Kodori operation might strengthen those in Tbilisi who believe that a similar quick, forceful strike on Abkhazia might end that conflict. He labeled this a dangerous tendency that made both the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians nervous. He called on the international community to demand completely the elimination of the use of force and the return of the status quo ante in Kodori. He labeled the relocation of the Government in Exile a "provocation" to create a second power structure in Abkhazia, though given that Kodori is inaccessible for eight months of the year, we would have to wait and see what happened there in reality. He noted that Russia is additionally concerned about Kodori because it lies on Russia's borders.

19. (C) Ambassador replied that international community needed to continue its efforts to reduce tensions in the region. Russia also needed to use its influence to restrain the Abkhaz and calm the situation. The French Charge noted that Western Governments have urged Tbilisi to show restraint. Karasin replied that while Georgia listens to Western calls for restraint, in reality it is engaged in intensive militarization, buying tanks and howitzers from Central Europe. Calls for restraint must be accompanied by concrete measures to prevent militarization. Karasin ended with a

dire warning that under current circumstances public opinion in Southern Russia (read: the ethnic autonomies of the North Caucasus) is becoming harder to restrain and is taking on an increasingly belligerent tone. Karasin called for another meeting of the Moscow chapter of the friends later in September, before work started on the new UNSCR.

¶10. (C) Comment: Russia is trying to regain the initiative after the success of Georgia's Kodori operation. The Friends group has rarely met in Moscow, and Karasin appears to want to ensure that it will start doing so as a counterweight to the Tbilisi chapter. The aim of his tough message appeared to be to convert Russian unhappiness about the Georgian operation into something tangible in a UNSC Resolution. At the same time, Russia appears to be genuinely concerned that fighting will break out in Abkhazia as hard-liners gain in strength in Tbilisi and the Abkhaz become harder to control. That would force a change in the status quo, and change in any direction threatens Russian interests.
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